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Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking

by Susan Cain

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113 Highlights

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The archetypal extrovert prefers action to contemplation, risk-taking to heed-taking, certainty to doubt.

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quick decisions, even at the risk of being wrong.

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works well in teams and socializes in groups.

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we allow technologically gifted loners who launch companies in garages to have any personality they please, but they are the exceptions, not the rule, and our tolerance extends mainly to those who get fabulously wealthy or hold the promise of doing so.

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Extroversion is an enormously appealing personality style, but we've turned it into an oppressive standard to which most of us feel we must conform.

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Talkative people, for example, are rated as smarter, better-looking, more interesting, and more desirable as friends.

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Velocity of speech counts as well as volume:

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many of the most important institutions of contemporary life are designed for those who enjoy group projects and high levels of stimulation.

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To advance our careers, we're expected to promote ourselves unabashedly.

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introverts and extroverts differ in the level of outside stimulation that they need to function well.

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Extroverts tend to tackle assignments quickly. They make fast (sometimes rash) decisions, and are comfortable multitasking and risk-taking. They enjoy "the thrill of the chase" for rewards like money and status.

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Introverts often work more slowly and deliberately. They like to focus on one task at a time and can have mighty powers of concentration. They're relatively immune to the lures of wealth and fame.

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Extroverts are the people who will add life to your dinner party and laugh generously at your jokes. They tend to be assertive, dominant, and in great need of company. Extroverts think out loud and on their feet; they prefer talking to listening, rarely find themselves at a loss for words, and occasionally blurt out things they never meant to say. They're comfortable with conflict, but not with solitude.

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Introverts, in contrast, may have strong social skills and enjoy parties and business meetings, but after a while wish they were home in their pajamas. They prefer to devote their social energies to close friends, colleagues, and family. They listen more than they talk, think before they speak, and often feel as if they express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike conflict. Many have a horror of small talk, but enjoy deep discussions.

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The word introvert is not a synonym for hermit or misanthrope. Introverts can be these things, but most are perfectly friendly.

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Nor are introverts necessarily shy. Shyness is the fear of social disapproval or humiliation, while introversion is a preference for environments that are not overstimulating.

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the two concepts is that they sometimes overlap

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many introverts are shy, partly as a result of receiving the message that there's something wrong with their preference for reflection, and partly because their physiologies, as we'll see, compel them to withdraw from high-stimulation environments.

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the shy person is afraid to speak up, while the introvert is simply overstimulated—but to the outside world, the two appear to be the same.

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that doesn't mean that your behavior is predictable across all circumstances.

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Introversion and extroversion interact with our other personality traits and personal histories, producing wildly different kinds of people.

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If you are a sensitive sort, then you're more apt than the average person to feel pleasantly overwhelmed by Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" or a well-turned phrase or an act of extraordinary kindness.

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You may be quicker than others to feel sickened by violence and ugliness, and you likely have a very strong conscience.

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When you were a child you were probably called "shy," and to this day feel nervous when you're being evaluated, for example when giving a speech or on a first date.

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(No one knows exactly how many introverts are highly sensitive, but we know that 70 percent of sensitives are introverts, and the other 30 percent tend to report needing a lot of “down time.”)

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America had shifted from what the influential cultural historian Warren Susman called a Culture of Character to a Culture of Personality—and opened up a Pandora’s Box of personal anxieties from which we would never quite recover.

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“The social role demanded of all in the new Culture of Personality was that of a performer,”

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Americans responded to these pressures by trying to become salesmen who could sell not only their company’s latest gizmo but also themselves.

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Many of these guides were written for businessmen, but women were also urged to work on a mysterious quality called “fascination.”

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the new guides celebrated qualities that were—no matter how easy Dale Carnegie made it sound—trickier to acquire.

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Shyness could lead to dire outcomes, they warned, from alcoholism to suicide, while an outgoing personality would bring social and financial success.

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“Save for a few odd parents, most are grateful that the schools work so hard to offset tendencies to introversion and other suburban abnormalities.”

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University admissions officers looked not for the most exceptional candidates, but for the most extroverted.

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It makes sense, say these researchers, that world travelers were more extroverted than those who stayed home—and

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We can also trace our admiration of extroverts to the Greeks, for whom oratory was an exalted skill, and to the Romans, for whom the worst possible punishment was banishment from the city, with its teeming social life.

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Similarly, we revere our founding fathers precisely because they were loudmouths on the subject of freedom:

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early Americans revered action and were suspicious of intellect, associating the life of the mind with the languid, ineffectual European aristocracy they had left behind.

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“prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet”—seems

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Americans who considered themselves shy increased from 40 percent in the 1970s to 50 percent in the 1990s, probably because we measured ourselves against ever higher standards of fearless self-presentation.

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If we assume that quiet and loud people have roughly the same number of good (and bad) ideas, then we should worry if the louder and more forceful people always carry the day. This would mean that an awful lot of bad ideas prevail while good ones get squashed.

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While extroverts tend to attain leadership in public domains, introverts tend to attain leadership in theoretical and aesthetic fields.

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Cooperative learning, corporate teamwork, and open office plans emerged at different times and for different reasons. But the mighty force that pulled these trends together was the rise of the World Wide Web, which lent both cool and gravitas to the idea of collaboration.

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Collaboration became a sacred concept—the key multiplier for success.

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We failed to realize that what makes sense for the asynchronous, relatively anonymous interactions of the Internet might not work as well inside the face-to-face, politically charged, acoustically noisy confines of an open-plan office.

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When you practice deliberately, you identify the tasks or knowledge that are just out of your reach, strive to upgrade your performance, monitor your progress, and revise accordingly.

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Practice sessions that fall short of this standard are not only less useful—they're counterproductive. They reinforce existing cognitive mechanisms instead of improving them.

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“intense curiosity or focused interest seems odd to their peers.”

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Open-plan offices have been found to reduce productivity and impair memory. They're associated with high staff turnover. They make people sick, hostile, unmotivated, and insecure. Open-plan workers are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure and elevated stress levels and to get the flu; they argue more with their colleagues; they worry about coworkers eavesdropping on their phone calls and spying on their computer screens. They have fewer personal and confidential conversations with colleagues. They're often subject to loud and uncontrollable noise, which raises heart rates; releases cortisol, the body's fight-or-flight “stress” hormone; and makes people socially distant, quick to anger, aggressive, and slow to help others.

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performance gets worse as group size increases:

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“If you have talented and motivated people, they should be encouraged to work alone when creativity or efficiency is the highest priority.”

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The one exception to this is online brainstorming.

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professors who work together electronically, from different physical locations, tend to produce research that is more influential than those either working alone or collaborating face-to-face.

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group brainstorming makes people feel attached. A worthy goal, so long as we understand that social glue, as opposed to creativity, is the principal benefit.

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social loafing: in a group, some individuals tend to sit back and let others do the work.

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production blocking: only one person can talk or produce an idea at once, while the other group members are forced to sit passively.

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evaluation apprehension, meaning the fear of looking stupid in front of one's peers.

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An audience may be rousing, but it's also stressful.

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They were utterly blind, in other words, to how much their peers had influenced them.

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"the pain of independence,"

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when the group is literally capable of changing our perceptions, and when to stand alone is to activate primitive, powerful, and unconscious feelings of rejection, then the health of these institutions seems far more vulnerable than we think.

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face-to-face interactions create trust in a way that online interactions can't.

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population density is correlated with innovation; despite the advantages of quiet walks in the woods, people in crowded cities benefit from the web of interactions that urban life offers.

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the café worked as my office because it had specific attributes that are absent from many modern schools and workplaces. It was social, yet its casual, come-and-go-as-you-please nature left me free from unwelcome entanglements and able to “deliberately practice” my writing. I could toggle back and forth between observer and social actor as much as I wanted. I could also control my environment. Each day I chose the location of my table—in the center of the room or along the perimeter—depending on whether I wanted to be seen as well as to see. And I had the option to leave whenever I wanted peace and quiet to edit what I'd written that day. Usually I was ready to exercise this right after only a few hours—not the eight, ten, or fourteen hours that many office dwellers put in.

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we should actively seek out symbiotic introvert-extrovert relationships, in which leadership and other tasks are divided according to people's natural strengths and temperaments.

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create settings in which people are free to circulate in a shifting kaleidoscope of interactions, and to disappear into their private workspaces when they want to focus or simply be alone.

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On some deep level, my fear of public speaking seems connected to other aspects of my personality that I appreciate, especially my love of all things gentle and cerebral.

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Temperament refers to inborn, biologically based behavioral and emotional patterns that are observable in infancy and early childhood; personality is the complex brew that emerges after cultural influence and personal experience are thrown into the mix.

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They literally use more eye movements than others to compare choices before making a decision.

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alertness, sensitivity to nuance, complex emotionality—turn out to be highly underrated powers.

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One theory, based on the writings of the sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, holds that when our ancestors lived on the savannah, being watched intently meant only one thing: a wild animal was stalking us.

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high-reactive child's ideal parent: someone who "can read your cues and respect your individuality; is warm and firm in placing demands on you without being harsh or hostile; promotes curiosity, academic achievement, delayed gratification, and self-control; and is not harsh, neglectful, or inconsistent."

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The neocortex, and particularly the frontal cortex in humans, performs an astonishing array of functions, from deciding which brand of toothpaste to buy, to planning a meeting, to pondering the nature of reality. One of these functions is to soothe unwarranted fears.

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Once you understand introversion and extroversion as preferences for certain levels of stimulation, you can begin consciously trying to situate yourself in environments favorable to your own personality—neither

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They "enjoy small talk only after they've gone deep,"

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a classic pattern of reward sensitivity run amok: at exactly the moments when the warning signs suggested slowing down, he sped up

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Extroverts tend to experience more pleasure and excitement than introverts do—emotions

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They will, "like anyone, be drawn from time to time to sex, and parties, and status, but the kick they get will be relatively small, so they are not going to break a leg to get there."

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“A lot of antisocial and self-defeating behavior results from people who amplify positive emotions.”

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Buzz can cause us to ignore warning signs we should be heeding.

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extroverts are more likely than introverts to be killed while driving, be hospitalized as a result of accident or injury, smoke, have risky sex, participate in high-risk sports, have affairs, and remarry.

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extroverts are more prone than introverts to overconfidence—defined

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Introverts also seem to be better than extroverts at delaying gratification, a crucial life skill associated with everything from higher SAT scores and income to lower body mass index.

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Introverts seem to be specifically wired or trained so when they catch themselves getting excited and focused on a goal, their vigilance increases.”

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Introverts are not smarter than extroverts. According to IQ scores, the two types are equally intelligent.

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on many kinds of tasks, particularly those performed under time or social pressure or involving multitasking, extroverts do better.

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Extroverts are better than introverts at handling information overload.

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Extroverts appear to allocate most of their cognitive capacity to the goal at hand, while introverts use up capacity by monitoring how the task is going.

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Extroverts are more likely to take a quick-and-dirty approach to problem-solving, trading accuracy for speed, making increasing numbers of mistakes as they go, and abandoning ship altogether when the problem seems too difficult or frustrating.

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Introverts think before they act, digest information thoroughly, stay on task longer, give up less easily, and work more accurately.

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if you leave them to their own devices, the introverts tend to sit around wondering about things, imagining things, recalling events from their past, and making plans for the future.

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The extroverts are more likely to focus on what's happening around them.

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Flow is an optimal state in which you feel totally engaged in an activity—whether

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In a state of flow, you're neither bored nor anxious, and you don't question your own adequacy. Hours pass without your noticing.

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The key to flow is to pursue an activity for its own sake, not for the rewards it brings.

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"Being smart is actually admired, even if you're weird,"

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Words are potentially dangerous weapons that reveal things better left unsaid. They hurt other people; they can get their speaker into trouble.

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Individuals in Asia see themselves as part of a greater whole—whether family, corporation, or community—and place tremendous value on harmony within their group. They often subordinate their own desires to the group’s interests, accepting their place in its hierarchy.

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We see ourselves as self-contained units; our destiny is to express ourselves, to follow our bliss, to be free of undue restraint, to achieve the one thing that we, and we alone, were brought into this world to do. We may be gregarious, but we don’t submit to group will, or at least we don’t like to think we do. We love and respect our parents, but bridle at notions like filial piety, with their implications of subordination and restraint. When we get together with others, we do so as self-contained units having fun with, competing with, standing out from, jockeying for position with, and, yes, loving, other self-contained units.

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Westerners value boldness and verbal skill, traits that promote individuality, while Asians prize quiet, humility, and sensitivity, which foster group cohesion.

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what looks to a Westerner like subordination can seem like basic politeness to many Asians.

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each way of being—quiet and talkative, careful and audacious, inhibited and unrestrained—is characteristic of its own mighty civilization.

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“People who don’t talk are seen as weak or lacking,”

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At what point does controlling our behavior become futile, or exhausting?

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many people, especially those in leadership roles, engage in a certain level of pretend-extroversion.

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Self-monitors are highly skilled at modifying their behavior to the social demands of a situation. They look for cues to tell them how to act.

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the best way to act out of character is to stay as true to yourself as you possibly can—starting by creating as many “restorative niches” as possible in your daily life.

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people who suppress negative emotions tend to leak those emotions later in unexpected ways.

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introverts like people they meet in friendly contexts; extroverts prefer those they compete with.

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venting doesn’t soothe anger; it fuels it.

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the very act of frowning triggers the amygdala to process negative emotions.

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One of the best things you can do for an introverted child is to work with him on his reaction to novelty. Remember that introverts react not only to new people, but also to new places and events.

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recoiling from novelty or overstimulation, not from human contact.

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Even if they’re generally forthcoming, many kids won’t share experiences that made them feel ashamed.
